

HAVING overcome title challengers Hendon last week, Wycombe

Wanderers now face their most important match of the season tonight (Tuesday) when they travel to Rhodes Avenue to meet Bishop's Stortford. Victory for either side would make them firm favourites for the Rothmans Isthmian League championship and the £1,000 prize money.

The prospects for the encounter are intriguing, for the sides are ideally matched. Stortford have still to come off the crest of the wave that has seen them to the Amateur Cup and several other triumphs, while Wanderers must have been elated with their victory over Hendon.

The Hertfordshire club's form this season has been quite exceptional and if they win tonight, they could be all set for the Amateur Football "Grand Slam". They have lost only five league matches this term and are currently unbeaten in their last 30 outings.

STUART EARP previews tonight's big game at Rhodes Avenue

Their first defeat came on the opening day of the season when they lost 3-2 at Woking. This was followed by a 3-0 reverse at home to Hendon but in somewhat bizarre circumstances. Two Stortford players were injured in travelling to the ground and substitutes had to be selected from the crowd. Soon afterwards they lost to Wycombe at Loakes Park 2-0 and Bishops could have had little argument about that result, beaten by the better side on the day.

They also went down at Leatherhead 3-0 (all three goals coming in the first 12 minutes) while their most recent reverse was away to Oxford City on October 6.

Since then, Stortford have gone from strength to strength, sweeping all before them. A fortnight ago they beat Ilford 4-1 to clinch the Amateur Cup in their Centenary year and then followed that by beating Walton and Hersham 4-1 in the London Senior Cup final. That victory was achieved with virtually ten men for Tony Bass, their tall leading goalscorer, was sent off

after 15 minutes, reducing Stortford to ten men. They scored three of the goals in the second half.

For the last month, Stortford have been playing three matches a week — and what's more they haven't dropped a single point. Recent results include a 1-0 last minute win at Tooting and Mitcham, a 1-0 away win at Dulwich, a 2-1 success at home to Leatherhead and a 1-0 victory over St. Albans. That game, which looked on paper a certain Stortford win, was only decided in the last five minutes when a John Still goal gave the Hertfordshire men three invaluable points. Their most recent result was a 3-1 triumph at home to Oxford City on Saturday evening. Still, John Dear and Dennis Mitchell were the goalscorers.

All this adds up to a side that is slap bang in form at present, full of confidence and with everything to play for. Unlike many sides, Stortford do not look like cracking under pressure.

For tonight's match they will be without one of their most

skilful players, Dennis Murphy, who tore abdominal muscles against Dulwich Hamlet and has been out of action ever since. He has not been able to train at all and will definitely not play. Murphy had a particularly memorable game at Wembley, scoring one of the four goals and generally causing havoc in the Ilford half. Wycombe must be relieved he will not be pitting his skills against them.

Although, Stortford's results have been highly impressive, Wanderers followers will rightly point to the earlier meeting between these two sides at Loakes Park on September 22. On that day, Wycombe played some of the best football of the term to run out 2-0 winners. The most important factor from the match was the way Stortford were beaten.

Sheer speed upfront was what turned the match in their favour. Centre backs Still and Martin Smith look unbeatable in the air. Both big men, they have thwarted many opposition attacks over the season and yet on that day in September, they were made to look slow and lethargic

simply by Wycombe playing the ball along the ground at speed. If they can repeat the tactic tonight, there is no reason why they should not record a similar result.

The Blues have had a small break from football since they drew 0-0 at Wokingham last Thursday and have not trained since. Manager Brian Lee reports no injury problems and will be able to select his side from a full strength squad.

Brian rates this match as the club's most important of the season. "Stortford are a very good side and their biggest strength is their current success. We won 5-1 there last season and I'll be happy if we do as well again.

"With Hendon out of the way and if we can play as well as we are capable of, we should be in with a chance. But you can't win championships on your own, other people must help you."

Defeat for either side tonight, however, would not rule out their chances of the championship for both clubs have difficult matches remaining. Wycombe were due to meet

Walton and Hersham on Thursday but as Walton drew in the Surrey Senior Cup 0-0 against Dulwich Hamlet last week, the match has been switched to next Monday (May 13) at Loakes Park.

On the Wednesday (May 15) the Blues are away to Leytonstone and the following Saturday, they take on the same opponents at home for their last league match of the season.

Bishop's have six matches outstanding. On Thursday they are at home to Leytonstone, the following Tuesday at home to Hitchin (whom they have beaten four times already this term), Thursday May 16 away to Hendon and Saturday May 18 at home to Woking. They have also to meet Walton and Hersham on a date yet to be decided.

The venue for that game, however, has been fixed. As Walton are unable to use their council-owned pitch at Stompond Lane after May 16, they have had to arrange their encounter with Stortford at Slough Town's Dolphin Stadium ground. So, in effect, both sides will be playing away from home. If the title is decided on that game, there could be quite a few justified complaints.